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"The show is deeply tragic, but also comic - after all she claimed to have had 50,000 lovers!"



RENDEZVOUS WITH MARLENE

International performer Ute Lemper has had a career-long love of the songs of the legendary Marlene Dietrich. She tells Brian Butler about her new Marlene show - due in Hove in February.

It was 1987 in Paris and a young performer called Ute had just opened to rave reviews as Sally Bowles in the stage musical *Cabaret*. "On my first night I saw Liza Minnelli and Joel Grey in the front row." She won the Molière Award and the media called her the new Liza... the new Marlene, "and I thought oh my God!"

Marlene was then 87, a recluse in her Paris apartment. The young Ute wrote to the ageing performer, apologising for the media hype and the comparison to Marlene. What happened then was the basis of Ute's new show, *Rendezvous with Marlene*.

"She rang me and we had a three hour phone conversation about Marlene's career, her love affairs, her songs. I put it away in my memory and rarely talked about it."

Fast forward 32 years and Ute decided it was time to revisit that conversation and make something of it. "I decided it was time to give her life again, mixed with my own choices and my own personal experiences. So it's a dialogue between the two of us, which Marlene

takes over in a kind of time warp of both of us. I had to grow to a certain age to capture her bitterness, her craziness; to bring her story back and tell people today how important she was."

The rise of nationalistic movements, particularly in Germany - new forms of racism against immigrants, along with new views of sexuality, mean it's the right time, according to Ute.

I wondered how much of the 32-year-old conversation Ute remembered? "I remember some expressions she used; her bitterness about her rejection by her homeland as a traitor in post-war Germany and I've done a lot of research too. I don't imitate her; she had a very different musicality, a very different way of singing, almost speaking some songs."

"She was a woman of the future, in the 1920s in the 1930s and the 1960s, and she still is today. She broke the rules. She hated authority and autocrats. She was against male

domination of society. She was androgynous, and masculine in her style. She was very much the boss and absolutely sexy. It was a new aesthetic at the time."

"Marlene didn't speak a lot about her bisexuality, her polygamous affairs. Virtually everyone she worked with, men or women, she slept with. She was equally attracted to both sexes."

Her banishment from Germany lasted many years. When she appeared there in the 1960s she was shouted at and there were bomb threats to stop her concerts. Ute says: "She told me she wanted to go back to Germany one more time - in her coffin; and she did."

The song *Lily Marlene* has a great significance in Dietrich's career. She sang it to the Allied troops on the front line in WW2 and it was broadcast via military radio all over Europe. It's said she spent longer at the front than Allied Supreme Commander General Eisenhower. The Nazis hated her for it.

In Berlin in 1992 Ute was due to recreate Marlene's famous role in the *Blue Angel*, where she sings her first hit *Falling In Love Again*. "Ten days before our first night Marlene died. I went to her funeral, it was threatened by neo-Nazi demonstrations. Her memorial event in Paris was attended by huge crowds; in Berlin her funeral was attended by under 100."

But in 2001, for what would have been her 100th birthday celebrations in Berlin, she was finally rehabilitated. Indeed Ute has performed this new Marlene show in the city, doing the whole thing in German. She's also performed it entirely in French and English.

The show is constantly progressing - it's been known for Ute to change its format mid-performance, and she now plans a fully-staged version destined for a continuous run in a theatre - first in New York and then hopefully in London. "I may add another performer to play various roles and dance," she tells me.

Ute has straddled many forms of music and her stage appearances have been heavily dominated by solo work. "I've done 30 years of it, but I also love the family feel of ensemble theatre."

The song choice for this show varies, depending on the country she's appearing in - more Brel and Piaf in France; more Weill in Germany; more American songs when she's performing in England.

"The show is deeply tragic, but also comic - after all she claimed to have had 50,000 lovers! And I enjoy channelling the pain of her life. It's not a romantic style. I aim to get to the core of her life."

MORE INFO

UTE LEMPER: *RENDEZVOUS WITH MARLENE* is on tour and at The Old Market, Hove, February 3, 2020.